

# *The Genius of Tagore*

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# THE GENIUS OF TAGORE

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What strikes us most about Tagore's genius is his versatility. He wrote abundant poetry, comprising a thousand and more poems and over two thousand songs; and he wrote plays, verse plays, prose plays and dance drama, plays and poems for children; short stories and novels, essays of literary criticism and of many other kinds, political tracts, ethical treatises and sermons, autobiography, lectures and letters, and even school books. Not only this. He set to music the songs of his own composition and gave to Bengal and, indeed, to India a new kind of light music called "Rabindra Sangeeth", which while it has the musical lilt of *sugam sangeet*, it has also dignity and reverence and even a note of ecstasy. He directed his own plays and often acted in them. He set up an institution to give a concrete expression to his ideas on education, where children would be helped to discover their natural aptitudes in an atmosphere of rural intimacy with nature, far from the stifling restraint of an urban classroom. When he was nearing seventy, he started to paint; and though Gustave Kahn, then the doyen of art critics, had grave misgivings about his paintings ("they are no better than a child's scrawls")<sup>1</sup>, Tagore's Exhibition in the Galerie Pigalle was a great success. Encouraged by this success as well as the praise given to his paintings by the Parisian Press and later by the Calcutta press also, he devoted more time to it and, in about twelve years till his death, he produced no less than two thousand paintings and drawings. Such versatility is as rare as it is remarkable. One thinks of Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe and Victor Hugo, though one may not press the analogies or make comparisons. He was "dear to all the muses."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sudhin N. Ghose in *Two Cities*, Autumn, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford University citation of D. Litt.

Our admiration for the range of Tagore's genius deepens when we realize that he achieved a degree of success in all these departments of activity, art or letters, which we do not usually expect from a dispersal of creative energy. This does not certainly mean that he has equal merit throughout. That could not be. The sheer weight of quantity would work against it. But this does mean that this versatile dispersal of his creative energy notwithstanding, there is a remarkably large body of good work to his credit; and, to quote Edward Thompson, perhaps "a larger body of really beautiful work than any other poet can show". This is remarkable when we remember that while Milton wrote only about 18,000 English lines of verse, Tagore wrote 150,000 lines of verse and drama, that is, excepting his non-dramatic prose, novels, short stories and the rest, which would be more than twice as much.<sup>1</sup>

His success in other fields notwithstanding, it is true that Tagore is pre-eminently a poet and, indeed, a singer of songs. He himself was convinced that at the Bar of Future, whatever would be the verdict on his painting, his short stories and plays, and even his poetry, the Bengalis would have to accept his songs and sing them in the fields and on the banks of rivers and in every home.<sup>2</sup> He was right in his judgement, for his genius is essentially lyrical. He wrote narrative verse in the two volumes of *Katha* and *Kahini* (1900). They contain tales of heroism and self-sacrifice drawn from the *Mahabharata* and the Budhist lore, like *Karankunti Samvad*, *Gandhareer avedan* and *Abhisar*, the story of Sanyasi Upagupta and Vasavdatta, and also incidents from Maratha and Sikh history. There are intensely dramatic situations in these tales and, what is more, a sense of Fate and pity hovers inexorably and relentlessly over the strife and valour of human beings. But the episodes and situations are there in the original, and the poet's contribution is not as much the creation of drama or character as the appreciation of the presence of these qualities in the episodes themselves. Nor did he, following Michael Madhusudan Datt, attempt an epic. He did right, for an epic is not

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1. Edward Thompson's *Rabindranath Tagore* P. 302 & P. VII  
2. *Introduction to Geetapanchashatee*, P. 13

merely a long narrative poem containing exploits and adventures. It demands a coherent organic construction, an architectonic building up of all episodes round a central figure and a drawing out of character in relation to situations and events with a theme, personifying the ethos of a people and deeply significant for man and community.

This is also true for his plays. They appear, generally speaking, technically deficient in translation with too many scenes in quick succession, lacking compactness and coherence of plot. *Muktadhara* is an exception. The dialogue is often wordy and there is too much of it. The symbolism is sometimes a little too thin and sometimes it overlays the action. This is not, however, to decry them wholesale. They have their merit. They break new ground in Indian drama and some of them like *Chitrangada*, *Phalguni* (The Cycle of Spring), *Rakta Karabi* (Red Oleanders), have the lyrical quality of his poems, while some others, like *Malini*, *Raja O Rani* and *Sacrifice* have dramatic intensity and, in ultimate analysis, are more dramas of subjectivity than of situation, or, like *Dak Ghar* (The Post-Office) pathos of human yearning, which is basically lyrical though intense. The plays of Tagore, generally speaking, give an impression of Tagore arguing both sides, projecting himself into the protagonists of different sides. The characters do not seem to develop independently of the author; and many of them are symbols and mouthpieces of ideas; and dramatic action often lacks movement. There is however no doubt that all of his plays centre round profound themes of man's life and social value.

Tagore is justly famous for his stories. In them his narration is simple and direct; there is hardly any embellishment; and, as in life, so in his stories, there are no neat solutions or conclusions. They are significant slices of ordinary lives, and reveal the pathos of men and women in humbler walks of life, who accept the frustrations, ironies and futilities of their lives in a simple, patient way. Tagore's stories are generally excellent in their genre, and their excellence seems to be due not in a small measure to, what may legitimately be called, their lyrical quality, a certain intensely subjective quality of emotion of the characters

in the story and the pathos or irony of the situations in which they find themselves as in the famous *Qabuliwallah* or the *Home-coming*.

We need not dwell upon Tagore as a novelist. His novels have already become dated and, in them too, we find the conflict of ideas prevalent among the various social groups at that time of great social ferment in Bengal represented by the characters and the situations. If we may put it thus, they have had their day, and in these days of deeper psychological complexes and wider social and national issues, they will hardly cause much stir.

As regards Tagore's paintings, one may justifiably say that if they reveal anything, they reveal how pre-occupied Tagore seemed to be with himself. For, his paintings, which grew out of scratches and cartouches round his words, loosen the grip of his conscious mind over the unconscious or, in other words, "he released in his painting the primal forces of the unconscious", and felt relieved of the trammels or inhibitions of his mind.

After this brief estimate of the "other departments of letters", we are left with Tagore's songs and poetry for a proper measure of his genius. First, as a writer of songs. He wrote, as I have said, over 2,000 of them; and it would be almost unfair to expect that all of them would be of equal merit or that there would not occur in them a repetition of imagery, metaphor or phrase like, say, the earth as mother the lure of Sri Krishna's flute, the play of Radha and Krishna, or the imagery of *shravan* and *sharat* and lotus and cowherds. Indeed, he wrote too many of them to be of equal merit. It has even been remarked that many of his songs seem to be playing on the surface and that in some of them there is not the depth of thought and genuineness of deeply felt experience. It may well be so; but perhaps no poet anywhere, neither Henrich Heine of Germany nor the Scottish Burns, has produced songs of intrinsic merit in such abundance as Tagore has not only written but himself set to music. His songs have rhythm and melody; he knew how to draw music from the consonants; and in writing his songs he drew upon the treasury of *Vaishnava*

lyrics and Baul singers of Bengal. There is a wide variety in them too, and they cater for a variety of mood and portray various phases of life. There are songs of and for children; there are folk-tune songs and songs enshrining the joys and sorrows of the common folk; there are songs of nature, of the sun and the moon, the breeze and the storm, and clouds and rains; there are love songs, light-hearted and passionate; and there are patriotic songs and, of course, the songs of *bhaktiras* or devotion and deep yearning, and even songs on death. It is true that to the unaccustomed ear, their musical lilt has a ring of sameness, that, in translation, they appear to be monotonous; and the writer seems to become a victim of the ease with which words come to him almost unbidden. Sometimes we have the impression of "Smenana imagery", a little too much of it, and of what J. C. Squire called "word-jugglery". But, as I shall try to make out, this is a one-sided and false view.

For this, however, there are formidable handicaps for those of us who cannot read Tagore in the original Bengali. Firstly, to quote Oliver Elton, the essence of poetry is volatile and evaporates in translation. This is particularly so with song-lyrics, whose appeal lies not as much in their theme, "a familiar matter of to-day", "some natural sorrow, loss or pain", as in the music of word, rhythm and tune or, as in the best of Tagore's songs, in the perfect fusion of their meaning, music and rhythm.

For instance :

गगने गरजे मेघ धन वरषा ।  
 कूले एका वसे आछि, नाहि भरसा ।  
 राशि-राशि मारा मारा धान-काटा हल सारा  
 भरा नदी क्षरधारा खर-परशा ।  
 काटिते काटिते धान एल बरषा ॥

(*Sonaar Taree*)

Secondly, translation in prose, however ingeniously done, cannot retain intact the tension of verse. Here is an instance :

जगत्-पारावारेर तीरे  
 छेलेरा करे मेला ।

अन्तहीन गगनतल  
माथार'परे अचञ्चल  
केनिल ओइ सुनील जल  
नाचिछे सारा बेला ।  
उठिछे तटे की कोलाहल—  
छेलेरा करे मेला ।

“On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous.

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet with shouts and dances.”

Even in this excellent translation something is lost, its dancing rhythm and the imagery of a word here and a word there, while in many poems where the translation is not as happily done, the lines are apt to be flaccid.

Thirdly, the sheer quantity of poetry that Tagore wrote is formidable. From *Sandhya Sangeet* (1882) all the long way to *Jannadine* (1941), he published 42 volumes of poems; and it seems doubtful if many Bengali scholars and critics themselves have read a substantial portion of all that he wrote.

We who do not know Bengali have only the translation of his work to judge him by; but we may not forget that these translations, even when done by him, are not fair to the original. In translating his own poems he often omitted turns and phrases and even whole passages when they seemed intractable. Let me give a somewhat crude instance of this. In *The Cycle of Spring*, we read :

Well Poet, what do you want to do now?

King, I'm going to have a race through those cries which are rising outside our gate.\*

What it means in the original is very clear : “I shall hasten to be among those who are crying for food outside the gate”.

Besides, it is only a very small quantity of his work

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\*P. 345. Collected Works, Macmillan.

that has been translated and, what is more, the little that has been translated is not definitive of the quality of his best. Even in the translation of his poems he leaves out, as I have said, whole lines, as in that fine poem called in the original (A Prayer) \*\* where a forceful line—

निज हस्ते निर्दय आघात करि पितः ।

Mercilessly, O Father ! strike, strike with Thine own hand—is left out.

It is because of these handicaps that we who have read little of Tagore and that too in translation have not been able to assess him rightly. Many of us think of him as a goody-goody poet, the poet of dreamy songs and vague moods, now mystical, now sensuous, albeit musical and tuneful. Hafiz Jullundari's (Urdu) poem in *Soz-o Saaz, Teen Mugganne*, poetizes this one-sided but common view,

नग़मा ख्वाब आवर था, नींद आने लगी मैं सो गया,  
अपनी मंज़िल भूल कर इस रंगोबू में खो गया !  
आह, नद्दी थी न मैंदाने गुलो लाला था यह,  
नग़ए टँगोर था यह, सहरे बंगाला था यह ।

It is time we corrected this view; for, in spite of the fact that he was born in a princely and talented family and had affluence and leisure, Tagore knew the tension and travail of the outer and the inner conflict, of social and subjective life; and in his own personal life knew sorrow and struggle and could not be a happy-go-lucky young man and a merry old soul as we wrongly picture him to ourselves. And, many of us may not know that he loved manly sport and enjoyed wrestling and swimming and hitch-hiked into the Himalayas. Those of us who take the trouble of reading the excellent Sahitya Akademi publications of *Ekottarshati* and *Geetapanchashati* (in Devanagari transliteration) can have some idea of Tagore's vitality, the "massive and masculine quality" of many of his songs and poems, and, in some of them, of fusion of passion and thought. Looking through the Akademi books, one cannot miss the variety of theme and form and his skill as a craftsman of word and verse—the variety of stanza-form, length of line, metrical construction and the pause in the line.

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\*\* "Where the mind is without fear....." "Gitanjali, No. 35

Moreover, Tagore is not only a writer of song lyrics but of other lyrics, reflective and symphonic, light and fanciful, and great imaginative odes. In some poems like *Urvashi*, *Sindhu Tarang* and *Chanchala*, he achieved a majesty of thought and form which we do not associate with a mere writer of songs, and which belie our common notions of his poetry. Surely, we have in them not merely a witchery of Bengal, of soft music and song, of flowers and fragrance, bringing down sleep and self-forgetfulness. Here we have storms that rage within man and outside in nature, on land and sea, descriptions rarely equalled. For instance :

हे भैरज, हे रुद्र वैशाख,  
 धूलाय धूसर रुक्ष उडीन पिगल जटाजाल,  
 तपः किलष्ट तप्त तनु, मुखे तुलि विषाणु भयाल  
 कारे दाओ डाक—  
 हे भैरज, हे रुद्र वैशाख १ (Baishaahk)

Or, *Sindhu Tarang*, describing a sea-storm and the wreck of the pilgrim ship bound for Puri, beginning

दोले रे प्रलय दोले अकुल समुद्र-कोले  
 उत्सव भीषण……

and leading on to the terrible scene.

तरणी धरिया भाँके—राक्षसी भटिका हाँके  
 दाओ, दाओ, दाओ!  
 सिन्धु फेनोच्छल छले कोटि ऊर्ध्वकरे बले  
 दाओ, दाओ, दाओ।  
 बिलम्ब देखिया—रोषे फेनाये फेनाये फोषे  
 नील मृत्यु महाक्रीशे श्वेत हये उठे।  
 क्षुद्र तरी-गुरुभार सहिते पारे ना आर  
 लौह बक्ष औइ तार याय दुभिं दुटे!  
 अध ऊर्ध्व एक हये क्षद्र ए खेलना लये  
 खेलिबारे चाय।  
 दाढाइया कर्षधार तरीर माथाय।  
 केटेछे तरणीतल सबेगे उठिछे जल  
 सिन्धु मेले ग्रास।  
 नाइ तुमि, भगवान नाइ दया, नाइ प्राण  
 जठेर विलास।……

प्राणहीन ए मत्तता न जाने परेर व्यथा  
 न जाने आपन ।  
 एर माझे केनरय व्यथा भरा स्नेहमयम  
 मनबे मन ।

Destruction swings and rocks on the lap of the shoreless  
 Sea,

In dreadful festival ! . . . . .

Gripping the boat the Storm, an Ogress, shakes it, shouting  
 “Give ! give ! give !”

Seething and foaming, the Sea lifts countless hands and  
 cries,

“Give ! give ! give !”

Foaming and hissing, wroth with check and delay,  
 The azure Death whitens with mighty anger !

The frail bark can endure its weight no longer.

Its iron ribs burst;

Above and Beneath are one, taking their plaything  
 They revel and sport.

The helmsman stands at the bows.

(The boat's bottom has burst; the water is gushing in;  
 The Sea has opened wide its jaws.)

Thou art not, O God ! Pity is not ! Life is not !

There is only the sport of Nature ! . . . .

This brute Madness knows not others' anguish;

It knows not itself.

Why in its midst was the mind of man placed,

So loving, so quick to suffer ? . . . . (Sea Waves\*)

Or, take a stanza from *Urvashi*

सुर सभातले यबे नृत्य कर पुलके उल्लसि,  
 हे विलोल हिंलोल उर्वशी,  
 छन्दे छन्दे नाचि उठे सिन्धु-माझे तरगेर दल,  
 शस्यशीर्ष शिहरिया कांपि उंठे धरार अञ्चल,  
 तब स्तनहार हते नभस्तले खसि पडे तारा—  
 अकस्मात् पुरुषेर वक्षोमाझे चित्त आत्महारा,  
 नाचे रक्तधारा ।

दिग्न्ते मेखला तब टूटे आचम्बिते  
 अयि असम्बृते ॥

\*Rabindranath Tagore (Augustan Books) by Edward Thompson, except  
 line within round brackets,

(In the assembly of Gods, when thou dancest in ecatasy of  
joy,

O Swaying Wave, Urvasi !

The companies of billows in mid-ocean swell and dance,  
beat on beat;

In the crests of the corn the skirts of Earth tremble :

From thy necklace stars fall off in the sky;

Suddenly in the breast of man the heart forgets itself,

The blood dances!

Suddenly in the horizon thy zone bursts.

Ah, wild in abandon!<sup>1</sup>

We should do well to know that not only as a social reformer and educationist but also as poet and playwright and short story writer, Tagore was an anti-traditionalist rebel in Bengali and Indian literature generally, and that he broke much new ground. We find in his poems love for children which, in such abundance and nobility, is, I am afraid, rare in Indian poetry apart from the devotional and mystical poems written in the tradition of Baal Krishna-leela (the play of the Child Krishna). Tagore's love for children is not for the child idealised or idolised, but of the ordinary child, capricious, naughty and even refractory. Sometimes as in येतेनाहि दिव (I will not let you go ), <sup>2</sup> a capricious remark of his four-year old daughter reveals to him a basic truth of life and nature. Throughout the whole countryside with its autumn fields weighed with ripe corn, the Ganges flowing to the sea in full autumnal flood, and the

“White strips of cloud upon the azure sky, like newborn calves sleeping after a feed of mother's milk”, a mere wisp of grass, the Mother Earth clinging to it; a flame flickering in the dying lamp; and, indeed, throughout heaven and earth's boundless stretch, it is the oldest cry, the deepest wail, that he hears: “I will not let you go.”

“And yet all things go and we must let them go !”

ए अनन्त चराचरे स्वर्गमर्त्यं छेये  
गम्भीर क्रन्दन, ‘येते नाहि दिव’ ! हाय,

1. Ibid. 2. Tr. by Humayun Kabir (*Poetry*, January 1959)

तबु येते दिते हय, तबु चले याय ।  
चलितेछे एमनि अनादिकाल हते ।

This is how the lyrical and the descriptive coalesce in his poems and how, life and nature becoming one, the vision of the unity of all creation is revealed. This is so not necessarily in some mystical and philosophical sense but in a way in which intimacy is easily but deeply established between us and life and nature without.

Tagore loved the earth, its sights and sounds and smells. We find in him what is, again, not common in Indian literature, not as much the love of as a keen and detailed observation of bird and beast, tree and flower, river and rural life, rains and the round of seasons, and, indeed, nature in all her varying moods and life out of doors. All this was not there to any significant extent in the Indian literature before Tagore. For an example, we may take the pictures of Happiness and Noon\*:

Snared with fat weeds, the shrunk, penurious stream  
Is stagnant; sits upon a half-sunk barge  
A kingfisher; two cows besides the marge  
Browse in a fallow field; an empty boat  
Tied to the landing, idly sags at float;....  
Moist muzzle tilted to the burning skies,  
And all its soul at rest in its soft eyes,  
Soaks, plunged in peace, a wallowing buffalo;  
On the deserted ghat a sun—drowsed crow  
Bathes, flapping; dances on the margent green  
A wag tail; insects flaunt their various sheen,  
....with strident, honking calls, a goose  
Prunes with wet beak his snowy plumes profuse;  
A hot wind rushes, hearing of burnt grass  
The fragrance—far afield its fierce gusts pass;  
On the still air the yapping quarrels sound  
Of village dogs,....at whiles arise  
Screechings of mynas, pipal's wearied sighs;  
Shrill keen of kites; or the tormented scream  
Of the wrenched boat at sudden tug' the stream.

(Chaitaali)

We have here the sights, the sounds and the smells, all con-

\*Tr. by Edward Thompson (Augustan Books)

tributing to the making of the picture of a river scene at noon.

Tagore is very much rooted to the earth and the life around him. Even in his quest after the eternal and the one amidst and behind the transient and multitudinous show of life, in the *Gitanjali* period and later, he never loses touch with "the lowliest and lost," with the *majur* (workman) cutting earth and the little *Didi* scouring and scrubbing pots and pans—

नदी तीरे माटि काटे साजाइते पाँजा  
पश्चिमि मजुर । ताहादेरि छोटो मेये  
घाटे करे आनागोना । कत घषा माजा  
घटि बाटि थाला लये। …(चैतालि)

or, with man and beast living together in the lap of nature:—

"I saw a big buffalo with mud-stained hide standing near the river with placid, patient eyes; and a youth, knee-deep in water, calling it to its bath.

"I often wonder where lie hidden the boundaries of recognition between man and beast whose heart knows no spoken language.

"Through what primal paradise in a remote morning of creation ran the simple path by which their hearts visited each other?.....

"Those marks of their constant tread have not been effaced though their kinship has been long forgotten.

"Yet suddenly in some wordless music the dim memory wakes up and the beast gazes into the man's face with a tender trust, and the man looks down into his eyes with amused affection....."\*

In his short stories too Tagore gave a place to "the lowliest and lost.". Till he did so, they were the untouchable of Indian literature and were there, if at all, only incidentally, and not in their own right. We may not forget that Tagore's sentiment is often stern; and his imagery bold and sublime,\*\* and there is cerebration and "sustained power of abstract thought and imagination" in many of his poems, e.g., *Chhabi*, *Shahjahaan*, *Chanchalaa*, *Tapo-*

\*The Gardener, No.,s 78-79

\*\*C.P. Karan Kunti Sambaad, *Urvashi* and *The Oarsmen* (Fruit Gathering LXXX)

*bhang* and *Balaakaa*, and many others; and, what is to me more significant, he brought to Indian literature a new attitude and a new outlook.

The eponymous poem *Balaakaa*, incidentally, reminds us of Tagore's visit to Kashmir in October 1915 where he wrote this and a few other poems of a volume which all discerning critics are agreed upon as being among the most mature of his poems.\* Here is the noble opening of the poem describing a Jhelum scene from the Munshibagh ghat where he stayed in a houseboat and where the Jhelum has its longest loop and the view is open and wide.

सन्ध्यारागे—भिलिमिलि भिलमेर स्त्रोतखानि बांका  
आंधारे मलिन हल, येन खापे ढाका  
बांका तलोयार, .....

"The meandering current of the Jhelum,  
Like a curved sword, glistering in the twilight,  
Merges into darkness.

At the ebb of day comes the tide of night  
Carrying myriads of star-flowers  
Floating on its dark waters.

At the foot of the dark mountains  
Stand in rows the *deodar* trees,  
As if creation would whisper in dreams,  
Unable to utter its message clearly.

Only the gathering of unuttered sounds  
Rumbles in the dark.

To come back to the point. Poetry, it has been rightly said, is written with words, not ideas; but it is true nonetheless that every significant poet and writer has an attitude or outlook on life and nature and, may be, an insight and vision too. In any legitimate sense of the word, Tagore is a thinker and, what is more, a seer. He has a vision of the unity of life. This "cosmic religion" (to quote a phrase of Einstein) is no doubt as old as the hills in India but Tagore's vision is distinguished in some significant ways.

This brings me more specifically to those aspects of Tagore's work which have an abiding significance for all

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\*Now tr. by Aurobindo Bose (*A Flight of swans*, John Murray).

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घाटे करे आनागोना । कत घषा माजा  
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or, with man and beast living together in the lap of nature:—

"I saw a big buffalo with mud-stained hide standing near the river with placid, patient eyes; and a youth, knee-deep in water, calling it to its bath.

"I often wonder where lie hidden the boundaries of recognition between man and beast whose heart knows no spoken language.

"Through what primal paradise in a remote morning of creation ran the simple path by which their hearts visited each other?.....

"Those marks of their constant tread have not been effaced though their kinship has been long forgotten.

"Yet suddenly in some wordless music the dim memory wakes up and the beast gazes into the man's face with a tender trust, and the man looks down into his eyes with amused affection....."\*

In his short stories too Tagore gave a place to "the lowliest and lost.". Till he did so, they were the untouchable of Indian literature and were there, if at all, only incidentally, and not in their own right. We may not forget that Tagore's sentiment is often stern; and his imagery bold and sublime,\*\* and there is cerebration and "sustained power of abstract thought and imagination" in many of his poems, e.g., *Chhabi*, *Shahjahaan*, *Chanchalaa*, *Tapo-*

\*The Gardener, No.,s 78-79

\*\*C.P. Karan Kunti Sambaad, *Urvasi* and *The Oarsmen* (Fruit Gathering LXXX)

*bhang* and *Balaakaa*, and many others; and, what is to me more significant, he brought to Indian literature a new attitude and a new outlook.

The eponymous poem *Balaakaa*, incidentally, reminds us of Tagore's visit to Kashmir in October 1915 where he wrote this and a few other poems of a volume which all discerning critics are agreed upon as being among the most mature of his poems.\* Here is the noble opening of the poem describing a Jhelum scene from the Munshibagh ghat where he stayed in a houseboat and where the Jhelum has its longest loop and the view is open and wide.

सन्ध्यारागे—फिलिमिलि फिलमेर स्त्रोतखानि बांका  
आंधारे मलिन हल, येन खापे ढाका  
बांका तलोयार, .....

"The meandering current of the Jhelum,  
Like a curved sword, glistering in the twilight,  
Merges into darkness.

At the ebb of day comes the tide of night  
Carrying myriads of star-flowers  
Floating on its dark waters.

At the foot of the dark mountains  
Stand in rows the *deodar* trees,  
As if creation would whisper in dreams,  
Unable to utter its message clearly.

Only the gathering of unuttered sounds  
Rumbles in the dark.

To come back to the point. Poetry, it has been rightly said, is written with words, not ideas; but it is true nonetheless that every significant poet and writer has an attitude or outlook on life and nature and, may be, an insight and vision too. In any legitimate sense of the word, Tagore is a thinker and, what is more, a seer. He has a vision of the unity of life. This "cosmic religion" (to quote a phrase of Einstein) is no doubt as old as the hills in India but Tagore's vision is distinguished in some significant ways.

This brings me more specifically to those aspects of Tagore's work which have an abiding significance for all

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\*Now tr. by Aurobindo Bose (*A Flight of swans*, John Murray).

Indian literature and for the youth of our country. Firstly, there is in him a full and frank acceptance of life. This was and still continues to be re-invigorating to Indian literature; for, whatever tradition there has been of this (and it certainly has been there from the Vedic Samhita onwards), it has been overlaid with the other and stronger and more prolific tradition of renunciation, asceticism and withdrawal from the illusory and impermanent world of senses. Tagore set his face against this nirvanic deliverance. For him deliverance is not in renunciation. He feels the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight:

वेराग्यसाधने मुक्ति, से आमार नय ।  
असंख्य बन्धन-माखे महानन्दमय  
लभिब मुक्तिर स्वाद । (मुक्ति) ।

At numerous places in poems, plays and stories, this affirmation of the world and life breaks out. Says he,

“Let whose will with shut and brooding eyes,  
If earth be real or mere dream surmise!  
Meanwhile let me with thirsty vision drink  
Its beauty ere my sun of life shall sink.”\*\*

Or “Reverend Sir, forgive this pair of sinners, spring winds today are blowing in wild eddies, driving dust and dead leaves away, and with them your lessons are all lost.

Do not say, father, that life is a vanity. For we have made truce with death for once, and only for a few fragrant hours we two have been made immortal.

इन्द्रियेर द्वारे  
रुद्ध करि योगासन, स नहे आमार ।

(That I will shut the doors of my senses, is not my yoga) <sup>2</sup>

And, “Let my vows of Sanyasi go, I break my staff and my alms-bowl. (This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time—let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims....The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth..... (italics mine)<sup>3</sup>

\*\*Augustan books (*Rabindranath Tagore*)

1. Gardener 44, also 48. 2. Gitanjali 73. 3. Sanyasi in *Sanyasi or the Ascetic*

Time and space are not an illusion for Tagore, nor a snare, they are the ground for divine sport; and the body is his bride—she has lighted her lamp in his house.<sup>1</sup> God needs man as much as man needs Him; and the Infinite can truly be seen only in the finite.

ଆମାରେ ତୁମି ଅଶେଷ କରେଛେ, ଏମିନ ଲୀଲା ତବ ।

(Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure)<sup>2</sup>

ଆପନି ପ୍ରଭୁ ସୃଷ୍ଟିବାନ୍ଧନ ପ'ରେ ବାନ୍ଧା ସବାର କାଛେ ।

(Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.)<sup>3</sup> or, Day after day you buy smiles from my eyes, and you find your love carven into the image of my life<sup>4</sup>

Sages tell us that Heaven is beyond the limits of birth and death unswayed by the rhythm of day and night. But the poet knows that its eternal hunger is for time and space, and it strives evermore to be born in the fruitful dust.

Heaven is fulfilled in your sweet body, my child.<sup>5</sup>

In this attitude there is something of special interest for us in Kashmir where we are, in a sense, the inheritors of the ancient Agama tradition as interpreted by the Saiva poet-philosophers of Trika Monism, like Utpala and Abhinavagupta.

Compare Tagore's

एइ वसुधार  
मृत्तिकार पात्रखानि भरि वारम्बार  
तोमार अमृत ढालि दिव अविरत  
नानावर्णगन्धमय । .....  
ये-किछु आनन्द आଛେ ଦୃଶ୍ୟ ଗନ୍ଧେ ଗାନେ ।  
ତୋମାର ଆନନ୍ଦ ରବେ ତାର ମାଭଖାନେ ॥<sup>6</sup>

With Utpala's

तत्तदिन्द्रियमुखेन सन्ततं  
युष्मदर्चनरसायनासवम ।  
सर्वभाव चषकेषु पूरिते—  
ष्वापिवन्नपि भवेयमुन्मदः ॥<sup>7</sup>

("Would that imbibing deep at every pore

1. Fruit-Gathering 72 2. Gitanjali 1 3. Gitanjali 11 4. Fruit-Gathering 77, also Gitanjali 45—46. 5. Lovers' Gift 49  
6. ମୁକ୍ତି or, Gitanjali 73. 7. Sivastotraavali,

Of every sense thy love's ambrosial wine  
In brimful cups of all that is,

I might for ever feel divinely drunk!"")<sup>1</sup>

Abhinavagupta enjoins on us neither to renounce nor to grasp but, firmly seated in the Self, enjoy ourselves.

मा किञ्चित्त्यज मा गृहाण, विलस, स्वस्थी यथावस्थितः ।<sup>2</sup>

It would however be wrong to say that Tagore had the aesthetic philosophy of Abhinavagupta and Rasavaadins, that aesthetic experience consists in "the tasting of one's states of consciousness charged with delight" and that the value of all art lies in unfolding higher levels of consciousness leading on to the Vision Beatific of Reality. Nor does Tagore conceive of beauty only as, or love it because it is, "an attribute of the divine and not for its own sake," as Radhakrishnan holds.<sup>3</sup> Tagore did conceive of the ultimate values as Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram, not as separate entities but only as aspects of the One Reality, and, in prayerful moods, he deeply felt that he was "a little flute of a reed in his immortal hands".

"I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine  
I have a corner seat."

But God gives himself to man in love, and He must; for "O thou lord of all heavens, where would be Thy love if I were not"<sup>4</sup> And, art for him has value because it enriches our experience of life and nature and deepens in us the sense of the unity of all life.

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment."<sup>6</sup>

1. Tr by Zindia Kaul. 2. Anuttarashtika.

3. Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore

4. Gitanjali 15 5 1bid 65 and 56 6. Ibid 69 also No's 43 63 63  
Basundharaa (The world)

Tagore loves the earth. It is his earth from long long ago, and his love for her knows no satiety. Indeed he wishes her to clasp him firmly in both her arms.

ଆମାର ପୃଥ୍ବୀ ତୁମି  
ବହୁ ବରଷେର ।—  
— — ଏଖନୋ ମିଟେନି ଆଶା:  
ଏଖନୋ ତୋମାର ସତନ-ଅମୃତ-ପିପାସା  
ମୁଖେତେ ରୟେଛେ ଲାଗି, … ଜନନୀ, ଲହୋ ଗୋ ମୋରେ—  
ସଧନବନ୍ଧନ ତବ ବାହୁଯୁଗେ ଧରେ—

In *Farewell to Heaven*,<sup>1</sup> the soul, about to return to the earth after living ten million years in Heaven, does not see farewell go a—sighing. The land of heavenly joy is griefless and heartless and indifferent, and there are no farewell tears here—

ଆଜି ଶେଷ ବିଚଛେଦେର କ୍ଷରେ  
ଲେଶମାତ୍ର ଅଶ୍ରୁରେଖା ସ୍ଵର୍ଗେର ନୟନେ  
ଦେଖେ ଯାବ, ଏଇ ଆଶା ଛିଲ । ଶୋକହିନ  
ହୃଦିହିନ ସୁଖସ୍ଵର୍ଗଭୂମି, ଉଦ୍ଦାସୀନ  
ଚେଯେ ଆଛେ । ——

and the soul exclaims : This our land of decay and death is surely not Heaven— but it is our mother land :

ମର୍ତ୍ତଭୂମି ସ୍ଵର୍ଗ ନହେ, ସେ ଯେ ମାତୃଭୂମି ——

In a delightful reverie in the poem, *In Old Time*<sup>2</sup> he recalls how, if he had lived in Kalidasa's time, his heart should have been made captive by some charming woman—

କୋନୋ ନାମଟି ମନ୍ଦାଲିକା,  
କୋନୋ ନାମଟି ଚିତ୍ରଲେଖା,  
ମଞ୍ଜୁଲିକା ମଞ୍ଜରିଣୀ ଭଂକାରିତ କତ:—

whose names, Mandaalikaa, Chitralekhaa, Manjulikaa, Manjarinee, make a sweet symphony. But what use recalling the past that is dead? Even the Mahakavi Kalidasa lives only in name while we are alive today and there is no dearth of beautiful women whom poor Kalidasa could not even think of :

ମହାକବିର କଳପନାତେ ଛିଲ ନା ତାଂରଛବି ।

1. *Svarga Hoite Bidoy.* 2. *Seekaal*

Tagore recognizes the transtoriness of things (Carpe-diem) but sorrows not. On the contrary, he sings of the *Kshanik*, the transient and the momentary<sup>1</sup>

क्षणिकेर गान गारे आजि प्राण, क्षणिक दिनेर आलोके

यारा आसे याय, हासे आर चाय,

पश्चाते यारा फिरे ना ताकाय,

नेचे छुटे धाय, कथा ना शुघाय, फटे आर टुटे पलके—

ताहादेरि गान गारे आजि प्राण, क्षणिक दिनेर आलोक ।

He recognizes the existence of sorrow and death, ugliness and evil.

“The early evening star disappears.

The glow of a funeral pyre slowly dies by the silent river.

Jackals cry in chorus from the courtyard of the deserted

house in the light of the worn-out moon.....

Who is there to whisper the secrets of life if I, shutting my doors, should try to free myself from mortal bonds<sup>2</sup>

This for him is the function of art, not to hide the ugliness of life but to see it in proper perspective. He himself knew domestic bereavement. His wife died very early, his daughter and youngest son followed soon and many an hour did he spend “in the strife of the good and the evil”<sup>3</sup> “The poet’s religion,” says he, “acknowledges the facts of evil, it openly admits the weariness, the fever and the fret in the world where men sit and hear each other groan.” Morally, he attacked and fought all that was unjust and wrong and evil. But from the aesthetic point of view, his conviction was that “our aesthetic sensibility attempts to bring the whole of reality within its joyful embrace. The more completely we view the panorama of the universe, the more we realize that good and evil, the pleasure and pain, life and death, in their ceaseless ebb and flow, constitute the symphony of the universe. When we contemplate the symphony as a whole

1. *Udbodhan*

2. *Gardener II*

3. *Gitanjali* 89, also 52

no note sounds false, nothing is ugly.”<sup>1</sup> Thus it is that sorrow and death in his poems<sup>2</sup> leave us calm and composed though a little chastened. This, no doubt, is not the temper or attitude of the post-thirties’ modern literature. Tagore knew this, and protested that “this exultant disillusionment proclaiming that the images enshrined on our altars of worship, even if beautiful, are made of mud —this defiant distrust and denigration of reality too is only a subjective reaction and a passing perversion of the spirit. This too cannot claim to be based on a detached and profoundly objective standpoint towards reality any more than the romantic sentimentalism of the early 19th century.”<sup>3</sup>

Parenthetically, it may be said here that while Tagore’s novels have become dated already, dealing as they are with social problems, his essays and addresses give us a refreshingly new interpretation of the truths of our ancient culture and some very acute and original literary criticism which have value even today.

Secondly, another aspect of his work and personality which has abiding significance is that Tagore is not a revivalist. When we come to think of it, this is very remarkable, indeed, and shows integrity and courage of a rare kind. At a time when we were struggling for political freedom and both Hindus and Muslims were, as a support to our national pride, indiscriminately glorifying our past and developing a revivalist chauvinism with hateful consequences which still dog us, Tagore remained singularly free from it. Tagore’s patriotism is made of sterner stuff and he can mock and satirize and lash at lifeless convention and dead traditions<sup>4</sup> and he exhorted us to fall in step with time and forge ahead, for otherwise we shall fall behind and go under.

मानवेर साथे योग दिते हवे—  
ता यदि ना पार चेये देखी तबे  
ओइ आछे रसातल, भाइ  
आगे चल आगे, चल भाइ ॥

1. Sahitya (Visva-Bharati 1958). Also Gitanjali 53, 58 add 23, 40)

2. Gitanjali 24, 86, 90-100! 103 and see “Wings of Death” (John Murray) containing the last poems of Tagore.

3. Sahityer Pathe (Visva-Bharati 1958)

4. C.P. Dui Paakhi (The Two Birds-one in the cage, the other free in the forest), Dharma Prachhaar, etc.

Moreover, his patriotism is all-inclusive. He invites all to the Motherland's crowning—

एसो है आर्य, एसो अनार्य, हिन्दु मुसलमान—  
एसो एसो आज तुमि डंगराज, एसो एसो खूस्टान ।  
एसो ब्राह्मण शुचिकरि मन धरो हात सबाकार—  
एसो हे पतित, करो अपनीत सब अपमानभार—  
मार अभिषेके एसो एसो त्वरा,

Come ye Aryan, come non-Aryan, Hindu, Muslim come,  
Come ye English, come ye Christians, welcome everyone,  
Come Brahmin, cleanse your mind and clasp the hand of all,  
Come ye outcaste, come ye lowly, fling away the load of  
shame!

Come, one and all, to the Mother's crowning<sup>1</sup>

In several poems, like *Apamaanita* and *Dhulaamandir*<sup>2</sup> he stresses the duty we owe to the lowliest and the backward in society—the obligation which, in spite of the “*sarvabhoottahiteratah*” tradition, we in India have been loth to discharge. “Only if the thought of good” says he, “is ever wakeful in us, can society find in itself the power and readiness to overcome those habits which gradually decay into dead matter and hinder progress by cluttering the path with rubbish”<sup>3</sup> In a fine poem<sup>4</sup> he says:

I know thee as my God and stand apart.... I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet....

Thou art the Brother amongst my brothers but I heed them not; I divide not my earnings with them, thus sharing my all with thee.

In pleasure and pain, I stand not by the side of men and thus stand by thee....

Not only this. When invited by Gandhiji to join the Non-co-operation Movement, Tagore had the rare courage to say to him,

“Gandhiji, the whole world is suffering from a cult of selfish and short-sighted nationalism, India has always offered hospitality to all nations and creeds. I have come to believe that we in India still have much to learn from the West and its Science, and we still,

1. Baarat Tirtha (Tr. *Indian Literature*, Vol I No: 2) 2. Gitanjali 11  
3. Atma Parichaya (Tr. *Quest* May 1961) 4. Gitanjali 77 also see 10,11,63.

through education, have to learn to collaborate among ourselves."

Surely, this has urgent relevance even at the present day.

Thirdly, this nationalism of his was closely connected with, and indeed grounded in, his internationalism and large-hearted humanism. He was certainly a *Visvamaanava*, a world man, such as we have to be now in sheer self-preservation. Nor did he merely sing of the federation of the world but through his practical enterprises of Sriniketan and Santiniketan, he worked hard for the realization of unity in human society, regardless of caste, creed, country and race. This universalism is not, as some protest, facile and flaccid since (they say) it does not find a solution for the conflict inherent in society which needs must resolve itself in bloody class and national wars. It is grounded in the unshaken conviction that, firstly, *maanavasatya*, the human truth, is the real truth for us rather than the absolute truth which even the best of us, like Arjuna, cannot see unless by a miracle; secondly, that love is the inevitable corollary of the unity of life; and, thirdly, that the test of love is action and sacrifice. His joy and love of life were not unrelated to the world in which he lived, it was not the joy of the mere singer and dreamer of dreams. On the contrary, he symbolized in himself both Nandini as well as Ranjan, both joy of life as well as joy of labour.<sup>1</sup> This faith in the unity of life and love of man would not however lead him to the easy belief in the efficacy of coercive uniformity through regimentation. He accepted the diversity of life. "In the poet's religion", says he, "we find no doctrine or injunction, but rather the attitude of our being towards a truth which is ever revealed in its own endless creation. In dogmatic religion all questions are definitely answered, all doubts are finally laid to rest. But the poet's religion never undertakes to lead anybody anywhere to any solid conclusion; yet it reveals endless spheres of light because it has no walls round itself." Some would say that Tagore's poetic credo lacks substance and it is not solid enough, that his poems give an impression

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1. *Rakta Karabi* (Red Oleanders)

of "vague sweetness and twilight melodies"<sup>1</sup> He has been accused, as by E. M. Forster, of not being "a seer or a thinker". To be a "thinker" and to gain solidity and certitude, they would have a poet build round himself a wall, a solid framework of doctrine or injunction of theological dogma or philosophical or other belief. But Tagore could not be lured to any such "solid conclusion" or static goal.

I am ever busy building this wall around; and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day, I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow.

And "O my eternal friend, for all the time, you are building me up anew!"<sup>2</sup>

Truth for Tagore lies not in the theological projections of our minds, our beliefs and certainties, but elsewhere and far beyond :

बाजिल व्याकुल वाणी तिखिलेर प्राणे—  
हेथा नय, हेथा नय, आर कौत्खाने । <sup>3</sup>

(In the heart of the universe echoed the burning refrain : "Not here, not here, somewhere for beyond.)

It is not that Tagore had no certainties. He had and they were made of sterner stuff and tested by "the dark night of sorrow" again and again through the last years (1937-1941) when he lived on the borderland of life and death. Death cannot swallow life, which is immortal. It only casts its shadow like Rahu. This I know for certain. <sup>4</sup>

There is no plunderer

Hiding in the secret caves of the Universe  
who can defraud love of its value—  
This I know for certain.

What was the ultimate Truth for me,  
Was nothing but a disguise

In which the ultimate Falsehood hid itself  
This disgrace of Existence

The law of the Universe could never bear,  
This I know for certain....

The self said : "The world is!"

EKOTARSHA3I P. 304 Balakaa  
Gitanjali 20,54,94 (The phrases are Tagore's); 2. Ibid 29.  
4 p. 86 *Wings of Death*

That truth is verified  
By the supreme truth of the "I" within me—  
This I know for certain."\*  
L

The Great unknown must remain a mystery till one  
face to face with it; for, as the great Persian lyric poet,  
Hafiz of Shiraz, said

कि कस निकशवद व निकशायद बा हिकमतई मूईमारा ।

(For none by wisdom could resolve

The Riddle that has baffled man)

Tagore had no answer to the question : *who are you?*

के तुमि पेल ना उत्तर—

the question the day's first sun as well as the last had  
asked; yet he was grateful that he would  
. . . . come to know fearlessly

The Great unknown.

It may, however, be conceded that Tagore is not a Vyas or  
Valimiki, nor a Sophocles, Dante or Shakespeare. There  
are too many of his songs and poems where we have at best  
the magic incantation of word music and verse but little  
intellectual fibre; there is, many of them, a repetition of  
idea, imagery and phrase. And yet it remains true that  
he is perhaps the greatest song writer and certainly one  
of the greatest lyric poets of the world. He has given us  
abundant songs and lyrics of a high order; lyrics of mood  
and emotion and sentiment; of fancy and fantasy built  
round a conceit or curious meditation; and lyrics which  
enrich the natural phenomena with personal emotions which  
they give rise to in a sensitive observant mind. They do  
more. The *Balaka Odes* and other poems already referred  
to enshrine an idea or theme in a language which still re-  
tains a sensuous appeal, and, what is more, gather many  
strands of ideas and images round one central theme, giving  
them a symphonic form. Many of them have the quality  
of vision; and sometimes, as in some of his last poems, he  
can be terse and intense. The best of lyrics can do no more.  
What he did for Bengali is incalculable. He extended the  
limits of diction, metre and theme and gave to the language  
many new literary art-forms; and if the opportunities for  
literary inter-communication between the Indian litera-

\*Ekotarshati P, 378

ratures had not then been few and far between, his influence should have been felt in all of them in a much fuller measure. Tagore fulfilled the promise with which he had set out in an early poem, *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga*<sup>1</sup> (The Awakening of the Waterfall, 1882). What he had seen had been “unsurpassable”<sup>2</sup> and he had the sweet blessings of beauty—

ए जीवने सुन्दरेर पेयेछि मधुर आशीर्वाद ३

and he poured forth the joy of these sweet blessings in abundant music and song.

आमि ढालिब करुणाधारा,<sup>3</sup>  
आमि भाडिब पाषाणकारा,  
आमि जगत् प्लावियाबेडाब गाहिया,  
ओकुल पागल-पारा ॥

“And I—I will pour of compassion a river;  
The prison of stones I will break, will deliver;  
I will flood the earth and, with rapture mad,  
Pour music glad. <sup>4</sup>

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3. Ekotharshati 2. Gitanjali 16, 96. 1. Nirjharer Svapnabhanga (The Awaking of the Waterfall) in Prabhat Sangeet, 1883, 4. Tr. Edward Thompson.



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